DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 483 016 UD 035 673

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TITLE	A District Leader's Guide to Relationships That Support Systemic Change. School Communities That Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts.
INSTITUTION	Brown Univ., Providence, RI. Annenberg Inst. for School Reform.
SPONS AGENCY	Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; Rockefeller Foundation, New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	19p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Brown University, Box 1985, Providence, RI, 02912. Tel: 401-863-1897; Fax: 401-863-1290.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Charter Schools; Elementary Secondary Education; Enrollment ; Home Schooling; Low Income Groups; Minority Group Children; Parochial Schools; Private Schools; Pubiic Schools; *School Choice; School Districts; Special Education; Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

This study was geared foremost to the needs and interests of district leaders and seeks to help them understand RSO/district relationships and make informed decisions about collaborating with external organizations. Its findings can also be of use to other key leaders of school reform such as school board members and other elected and appointed officials, funders, union representatives, and civic and business leaders. All of these stakeholders play a critical role in reform and develop widely varying types of relationships with RSO's, sometimes as part of the superintendent's relationship and sometimes independently. (Author)

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A District Leader's Guide to Relationships that Support Systemic Change

School Communities that Work:
A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

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SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK

An Initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

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School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

was established in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University to examine an element of the public education system that has often been overlooked: the urban school district. Its primary goals are to help create, support, and sustain entire urban communities of high-achieving schools and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children.

To help imagine what high-achieving school communities would look like and how to create them, the Task Force convened influential leaders from the education, civic, business, and nonprofit communities to study three critical areas: building capacity for teaching and learning; developing family and community supports; and organizing, managing, and governing schools and systems.

This article was adapted by Margaret Balch-Gonzalez from a study entitled *Reforming Relationships: School Districts, External Organizations, and Systemic Change*, prepared for the Task Force by Robert A. Kronley and Claire Handley of Kronley & Associates. The full study, which complements and augments the work of the Design Group on Family and Community Supports, is available at www.schoolcommunities.org.

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Support for this work was provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

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Task Force leaders and funders are listed on the inside back cover.

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School districts today face growing pressure from federal and state agencies and from their communities to improve student achievement. To raise outcomes for all students and sustain them at mandated levels, districts must reform themselves in fundamental ways, requiring expertise and resources that the districts themselves often do not possess. Increasingly, they have turned to external organizations for support in developing, implementing, and sustaining systemic reform.[1]

Community organizations have long provided certain kinds of support to schools and districts. But supporting *systemic* reform calls for a new kind of external organization that reflects the broad scope, long time frame, and demanding nature of the goals. In the 1990s, many such organizations were created or developed out of existing organizations; some played substantial roles in district reform around the country.

Research and reflection about these organizations is relatively new and still evolving. As yet, there is no consistent terminology to describe them. They have often been referred to as *intermediaries*, since they seek to bridge gaps between schools, districts, and other agencies. However, they have also assumed roles that go beyond mediation (such as advocacy, technical assistance, fund-raising, research, and evaluation) that aim to build the capacity of schools and districts to achieve systemic reform.

An alternative term, *reform support organization* (RSO), conveys the breadth and scope of the work of these organizations.[2] RSOs include a range of public, quasi-public, private for-profit, and private nonprofit organizations that seek to engage or are engaged by school districts in efforts at systemic reform.

Relationships between Districts and RSOs

Researchers have studied the *activities* and *structure* of individual organizations and also some of the *results* of this type of RSO/district collaboration – for example, how it has improved adult knowledge and skills.

In an effort to shed light on the *relationship* between RSOs and districts – an area that has not yet been extensively studied – SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK commissioned a study by Kronley & Associates of Atlanta. The researchers looked at why districts chose to partner with an RSO, the nature of the engagement, expectations and interim results, key factors in the development of a relationship that promotes transformation, and elements of the interaction that will lead to sustainable improvement (see sidebar on page 2).

The study was geared foremost to the needs and interests of district leaders and seeks to help them understand RSO/ district relationships and make informed decisions about collaborating with external organizations. Its findings can also be of use to other key leaders of school reform such as school board members and other elected and appointed officials, funders, union representatives, and civic and business leaders. All of these stakeholders play a critical role in reform and develop widely varying types of relationships with RSOs, sometimes as part of the superintendent's relationship and sometimes independently.

This article offers a summary of the findings from the study described on pages 2 and 3.[3]

[1] We define *systemic reform* as engagement by, or at, the district level to build capacity that will lead to sustainable improvement at many, if not all, schools in a system.

[2] This term and its definition were developed by school communities that work and Kronley & Associates.

[3] The findings in this study are based mainly on data gathered from June 2001 to May 2002, with some updates in September and October 2002 and further updates on Cleveland through January 2003. Specific districts may have undergone changes after completion of data gathering.

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ABOUT THE RSO/DISTRICT STUDY

Many organizations external to schools and school districts might be classified as promoting reform. For the purposes of this analysis, Kronley & Associates studied organizations that

- were pursuing systemwide change, rather than promoting specific policies or programs;
- sought to build the capacity of district personnel to realize change on the district level, rather than in one or a handful of schools;
- had some sort of formal collaboration with a district – that is, a structured relationship intended to lead to agreed-upon activities or results; and
- had advanced beyond the early stages of a collaboration.

About fifty reform support organizations were identified for possible profiling through a review of relevant literature, informal discussions with colleagues and others knowledgeable about district reform and about external organizations working with districts, the knowledge of Kronley & Associates and of Annenberg Institute staff, and queries to superintendents and other educators working in urban school districts. Of these fifty organizations, twenty-four that met the above criteria were scanned and profiled.

Four of the profiled organizations were selected for more in-depth review. Those that partnered with more than one district were asked to choose one to include in the review. A fifth in-depth review was done on one district, Cleveland, in which reform efforts were initially driven by multiple RSOs, several of which later consolidated into one major RSO. (See page 4 for more detailed information about the five partnerships chosen for in-depth review.)

The complete findings from this study – *Reforming Relationships: School Districts, External Organizations, and Systemic Change*, by R. A. Kronley and C. Handley – are available at <www.schoolcommunities.org/portfolio>. The 67-page report contains an extensive account of the results, detailed descriptions of the five RSO/district relationships chosen for in-depth review, and a bibliography. The Web site also offers profiles of the twenty-four RSOs meeting the criteria for the study.

For additional information about the five RSO/district partnerships studied in depth, contact SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK at the Annenberg Institute. For an in-depth report about Cleveland, see R. A. Kronley and C. Handley, *Changing Partners: External Organizations and Education Reform in Cleveland* (Atlanta: Kronley & Associates, 2003).

Key Elements of Successful RSO/District Relationships

All five of the districts studied showed the characteristics that are typical of large urban districts: many low-performing students and students from low-income and minority families, concern about standards-based reform, and a legacy of racial discrimination. The RSOs varied greatly in origins, principles, expertise, and funding, and, given the small number of organizations studied, none should be considered as "representative" of a type or class of RSOs.

Each of these RSO/district relationships was unique, and the contexts in any given district (e.g., personnel, political factors, funding relationships) were in constant evolution. Nonetheless, certain findings lent themselves to generalization and they are described below.

Building Trust

In many cases, the RSO/district relationship begins in an atmosphere of crisis. The districts in the study all displayed multiple problems with student performance, staff morale, leadership, and community relations typical of distressed urban systems. Furthermore, two had undergone or faced consolidation and another was under federal court supervision. Two others were so dysfunctional that observers had questioned their ability to operate independently. That these districts needed help was obvious.

The mere existence and wide recognition of need, however, does not make an RSO/district relationship work; it simply provides an opportunity to create it. Nor does the quality of the RSO's strategies to meet the district's needs, by itself, guarantee the success of the reform effort.

RSO/DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS IN THE STUDY		
RSO	**DISTRICT**	**TYPE OF RSO**
The Busara Group is a fee-for-service organization that provides technical assistance to districts pursuing reform (e.g., professional development, communications, strategic planning, standards development).	**Flint (MI) Community Schools**	**Imported**
The Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR) is a nonprofit, fee-for-service group that helps school districts build capacity for systemic reform based on the belief that student work is the core business of schools.	**Durham (NC) Public Schools**	**Imported**
The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) conceived and operates First Things First – a research-based, comprehensive education reform initiative.	**Kansas City Kansas Public Schools**	**Imported**
The Public Education Foundation of Chattanooga (PEF) is a local education fund that provides strategic support to the Hamilton County (TN) school district through comprehensive reform initiatives.	**Hamilton County (TN) Public Schools**	**Local**
Multiple RSOs initially drove Cleveland's reform effort. Several nonprofit organizations (business-backed organizations, organizations with programmatic expertise, a local education fund, and foundations) worked to build various capacities in a district that was severely distressed. These groups have had a history of interactions in an urban school system that has changed substantially in the last decade, and have undergone substantial change themselves. **Cleveland Initiative for Education (CIE)**, one of these RSOs, has recently emerged as the major locus of school reform, in accordance with the superintendent's vision of consolidating various RSOs' efforts.	**Cleveland (OH) Municipal School District**	**Local**

The success of the relationship depends more than anything on the development of trust. The district must surrender some of its defensiveness and the RSO, trusting in the willingness of the district to change, must transcend the limits of its theories and adapt its approaches to the messy realities of public education today.

Understanding Local vs. "Imported" Organizations

The characteristic that made the greatest difference in RSO/district relationships in the study was whether the RSO is local or "imported."

A *local* RSO has established roots in the district's community and a mission to improve education in that community; an *imported* RSO is located out-

side the district with which it is engaged, functions independently of a specific community, and usually assists several districts simultaneously.

Local and imported organizations differ in certain ways that directly affect the relationship with the district.

Nature of Ties to the District

Ties are closer and sometimes more politically charged in a district/RSO relationship when the RSO is local. This relationship is the local RSO's major and sometimes only reason for existence, making it difficult to walk away from its partner. The school district may also suffer consequences for ending such a relationship, even when it is justified: the district may lose grants that the RSO's efforts attract, the energy provided by committed and enthusiastic volunteers, and the goodwill of business leaders, foundation executives, or public officials associated with the RSO. When the partner is an imported RSO, it is easier for the district to end the relationship if it no longer adds value to the district's reform work.

Other important differences are that imported RSOs, as outsiders, are sometimes seen as more objective; and that the more limited presence of an imported RSO can sometimes help district faculty and staff to assume responsibility for the reform more quickly than they might have otherwise.

Sources of Credibility

Local and imported RSOs derive credibility from different sources. For local RSOs, credibility arises from the intimate knowledge of the community's educational issues and a commitment to improving conditions in their communities. For imported RSOs, credibility stems from recognition of their national experience and expertise. As the reform work develops, local RSOs are challenged to develop new capacities to meet changing district needs, and imported organizations must constantly work to add value as their reform takes hold in districts.

Beliefs and Programmatic Approaches

Local RSOs do not, for the most part, offer a defined framework, but rather develop an array of programs (e.g., leadership training, curriculum innovation, and professional development, in many cases supported by outside funding), to respond flexibly to a district's changing needs.

Local RSOs cannot risk losing goodwill by demanding that districts conform to a specific reform framework that the district neither chose nor helped design. The work of local RSOs is diagnostic, not prescriptive – they identify problems, analyze their causes, and develop solutions designed specifically for the district and informed by knowledge of the community.

Imported organizations, in contrast, work in more than one district and often have a specific and highly individualized framework that includes beliefs, structures, and actions and that leads to specific approaches to reform. Imported organizations vary significantly in their willingness and capacity to adapt their approaches to meet multiple or shifting district needs. When a district chooses to partner with an imported organization, it is often seeking to resolve issues that are not amenable to programmatic responses, which are often inherent in the approaches of local organizations.

Funding Issues

Whether the RSOs are local or imported, local and national foundations play a critical role in establishing, defining, nurturing, and maintaining RSO/district partnerships and, in doing so, can function as a type of reform support organization. Without their commitment, many partnerships would founder. In all of the RSO/district partner-

ships in this study, districts were dependent on foundation funds to underwrite the partnership.

The issues surrounding funding are somewhat different for local and for imported RSOs. Local RSOs typically assume responsibility for raising funds to support their work with districts. This does not mean that districts will not incur costs related to the work that RSOs do, but that the costs are often less explicit (in-kind costs) or that they are not fully calculated at the program's initiation.

Engagement of imported organizations usually involves an expenditure of substantial district resources, because of the distance and the cost of expertise. This direct cost may, at least initially, cause district leaders to pay more sustained attention to these relationships and to have greater – if not necessarily clearer – expectations about outcomes. The investment in the imported RSO is balanced against what the same dollars might buy elsewhere, and the RSO needs to continually convince the district that its work is adding value.

A major question for districts concerns their willingness to assume some of the cost of an imported RSO. The superintendent in Kansas City stated that, were funding to dry up, he would try to reallocate district funds to support the reform initiative. Other districts pointed to state budget cuts as reasons for their unwillingness to commit, even hypothetically, to maintaining a relationship with an imported organization.

A theory of resources should accompany the larger theory of change that informs a reform effort. None of the relationships with imported organizations in the study addressed the resources issue directly; money was available from the beginning of a relationship. But, if reform is to be sustained, the district must consider what it wishes to continue in the absence of the imported RSO and either budget or seek funds for it.

Role in Building and Sustaining Capacity

District transformation can be facilitated by an outside organization, but sustaining reform is primarily a local endeavor that involves district persistence, local capacity, and adequate resources. An imported RSO's greatest value may be its ability to help build local capacity and to ask hard questions about progress.

This suggests an additional role for imported organizations as they partner with districts – building local capacity outside the confines of the school system. Many districts work with imported and local RSOs simultaneously. None of the districts in the study that were partnering with imported RSOs had any direct collaboration between an imported and a local RSO. It may be in the district's interest to explore with the imported RSO – and to build into the work – relationships with a local RSO, which may assist in building both will and capacity to sustain the endeavor.

Essential Roles of District Leaders

The part played by district leaders is crucial to the success of a partnership. Several important elements emerged from the study.

Providing the Vision

The superintendent's vision and a shared understanding of the role of the RSO must animate the RSO/district relationship for the reform to succeed. RSOs can ensure that district leaders have up-to-date research on best practices and effective policies and help to shape or enhance their vision, but superintendents in the study strongly argued that the vision must originate with and be owned by the superintendent. The superintendent either creates the vision or internalizes and adapts parts of the RSO's approach and molds it to an evolving reform vision.

THE SUPERINTENDENT'S IMPACT

- In **Cleveland**, new district CEO (superintendent) Barbara Byrd-Bennett built a vision for the district and a plan for realizing it that led to significant changes in relationships between the district and the RSOs as well as among the RSOs themselves. For many years, the district had had revolving leadership and rapidly diminishing capacity to fulfill many of its traditional functions; the various RSOs stepped in to fill the gaps. Byrd-Bennett requested that the RSOs align their activities with her district reform plan, which they sought to do. As the district developed the capacity to take back some of its traditional functions, Byrd-Bennett concluded that the relationship between the district and the RSOs needed to change to support the district's reform efforts more effectively. As a result, she proposed a consolidation of the RSOs. The RSOs' response to this proposal varied; several did merge and have dedicated their work toward a comprehensive agenda of capacity building, while one chose to end its work in the district. Another RSO chose not to join the merger but continues to support the superintendent's vision and is working to help implement it.
- In **Flint**, the superintendent who designed and began implementation of a Rockefeller- funded reform resigned in late 2000 following a period of increasing contentiousness with the school board around several issues, including his approach to reform. While the progress made in reform under his leadership was uneven, there were promising signs of real change in many schools across Flint. His successor, hired in January 2002, did not dismantle the reform components already in place but made many of them optional, and he did not seek funding to continue the reforms (Rockefeller funding ended in December 2002). These changes in leadership and vision have raised questions about how much of the reform will be sustained.

RSOs also need to realize that without the superintendent's support, they may pursue relationships with individuals in the central office or in school buildings, but this "reform" effort will be little more than a sideshow, and funders who focus on reform that is truly systemic may be reluctant to support it. In Cleveland, for example, the superintendent made it clear that to keep the support of the district, RSOs needed to align their activities with her vision, resulting in a major change in the way the RSOs operated (see sidebar).

Embracing the Reform

Superintendents must unequivocally associate themselves with the reform and continually embrace the implementation strategies of the RSO, especially when the inevitable resistance arises. Educators are asked almost continuously to make changes in this era of high-stakes accountability, but the changes are not always well thought out or well supported.

Reform in each district in the study was initially met with skepticism and resistance by a number of people, but the visible commitment of the superintendents convinced many of the doubters that the reform was valued in the district and that leadership would provide consistent support to staff in implementing it.

Superintendents were also willing to demand change when some teachers and administrators continued to resist. In several districts, superintendents acted forcefully by putting pressure on or replacing noncompliant staff.

Empowering the Staff

The superintendent is the leader of and spokesperson for reform, but she must empower district staff to champion and help drive the reform. In all five districts, key central office staff members did the daily work of reform. These staff members met and talked often with RSO leaders and supported the work of the imported organizations' staff on their visits to the district. They also communicated with other central office staff, building leaders, and instructional staff about progress and monitored interim outcomes. They promoted the reform within the district and employed a variety of strategies to overcome pockets of resistance to the RSO work.

Empowering the Community

Schools are community institutions. Superintendent leadership and district buy-in is not enough; comprehensive efforts to involve all stakeholders (board, community, families, and unions) must begin early and continue throughout the reform work. While direct responsibility for schools rests with the superintendent and the district, others across the community (whether directly linked to them or not) are deeply connected to schools. The failure to gain stakeholder acceptance of, if not approval and support for, change can doom a district's reform effort (see sidebar).

RELATIONSHIP WITH STAKEHOLDERS

- **Kansas City Kansas** Public Schools and the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) were successful in gaining the teachers' union as a partner in reform, rather than an obstacle, through a series of roundtables with different community stakeholders. District and union leaders have continued to meet regularly to discuss reform efforts and to identify and respond to emerging problems quickly.
- In **Flint**, in contrast, collaborative mechanisms to keep the staff in each school and the community informed about reform efforts were implemented unevenly, resulting in some teachers supporting the reform, while others were uninformed about it or lobbied the school board against it.

Early Signs of Success in the RSO/District Relationship

As the RSO/district relationships in the study evolved, there were clear signs of robust interactions in which reform was taking hold. Although these benefits were in some cases still in early stages at the conclusion of the study, they represent promising indicators.

New Energy

RSO/district partnerships can energize educators, support and engage diverse talent and skills, and identify latent capacities in segments of school and district staff. This energy appears regardless of the theory behind or content of any specific approach to reform.

Teachers and principals have little patience with "the reform flavor of the day" – unfocused improvement plans that change just as educators are getting used to last year's program. But, if they become convinced that a reform will have the ongoing support of district leadership, most are eager to deepen their knowledge and skills to better meet students' needs.

In Durham and in Kansas City, participants understood that each RSO's reform strategy was meaningful and powerful in itself, but they valued it more as a mechanism to sustain engagement. The district's support and promise of ongoing commitment were more important than the choice of actual reform strategy.

The presence of an outside organization can also create excitement by underscoring the pioneering nature of the efforts and linking participants to the most current research on effective practices.

USING STUDENT OUTCOMES TO ASSESS RSOs' WORK WITH DISTRICTS

- From the start, the Public Education Fund (PEF) in **Chattanooga** tracked information about its initiatives, such as the number of participating teachers and their satisfaction with the process. But PEF came to believe that it should be held to the same level of accountability as the district, leading to the increasing use of quantifiable student outcome goals to evaluate the reform work.
- In **Kansas City**, an independent evaluation of the partnership with IRRE was established, using outcome indicators such achievement-test scores, student attendance, graduation rate, and use of demonstrated best practices in instruction.

More Interest in Achievement-Based Assessment

There has been little focus on assessing the contributions of RSOs in improving student achievement. Each of the RSOs in the study used some form of evaluation to monitor its work with its partner district, such as surveys or review meetings, but early approaches did not use student-achievement goals for evaluation. This is beginning to change as districts feel increased pressure from new standards and as RSOs become more reflective about their work. Some RSOs have begun to push for more rigorous evaluation (see sidebar).

Districts committed to long-term reform understand that their work with RSOs may not initially align with performance goals on standardized tests. Both partners recognize that if RSO/district efforts are going to be sustained, expectations about interim results must be established at the time of engagement. What is being evaluated, how it is to be evaluated, and how the evaluation is to be used should be decided at the commencement of the relationship.

Institutionalization of New Behaviors

Having a shared language is critical to reform. Educators typically work in isolation from one another, and their perceptions of what consti-tutes quality teaching vary. In Durham, terms such as "engaging student work" from the Center for Leadership in School Reform's Working on the Work framework led faculty and staff to feel they had a common understanding of the concept and helped them collaborate meaningfully.

Many educators spoke of assuming new roles. Some of these were formally defined, such as Hamilton County's Standards-Support Teachers (experts in standards implementation). Other new roles were informal and grew out of an expanded vision of learning that the reforms helped to cultivate. In Flint, teachers said their roles grew, through collective learning and reviewing student work, to encompass being a researcher, a creator, a collaborator, a communicator, a leader, and a learner.

SUPPORT AND AWARENESS IN ACTION

- In **Cleveland**, several foundations – the local Gund and Cleveland foundations, the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, and the business-backed civic improvement group Cleveland Tomorrow – were instrumental in initiating and continuing support for RSO involvement in a struggling district that had nowhere else to turn for the support it needed to remain viable. The success of this support helped enable the district to reestablish its leadership, develop its own vision to drive reform, reshape the context of its work with external organizations, and move from mere survival toward a coherent reform agenda.
- In **Kansas City**, the role of RSOs and funders in the district's comeback has drawn significant attention. Positive articles in national newsweeklies and regular coverage by local dailies have encouraged and validated a district that had long been considered ineffective in educating its students.

Growing Public Support and Awareness

RSO/district collaboration is fueled by money, and successful relationships can generate more funding. Investments in RSO/district relationships from prominent funders, such as the Rockefeller and Kauffman foundations, not only bring resources to a district, but also further legitimize the endeavor. Funders' support also insulates the district against critics who question whether it is appropriate to invest public funds in long-term reform that appears experimental when district performance is tied to annual results on standardized tests.

Closely related to the legitimacy provided by outside funding is the recognition that grows out of innovative RSO/district initiatives. Positive recognition is important to the relationship between an RSO and the district. When recognition comes, however, RSOs have learned that the far greater part of it must go to the district. Seeing that the district gets the credit for progress is not only appropriate, it is essential to reinforcing the trust that is at the core of these evolving relationships.

Other Important Issues for RSO/District Relationships

In the course of the study, several unresolved issues emerged that need to be addressed in RSO/district partnerships. The implications of these issues are important for partnerships and deserve further study.

Remnants of Racial Discrimination

RSOs and district leaders in each of the five communities expressed concern about the persistent achievement gap that has arisen from decades of unequal treatment. But few appeared to push for the inclusion of programs or initiatives targeted to minority students.

One reason for the reluctance to recognize that minority students may face unique challenges was the belief that standards are "race-neutral," and, therefore, specific initiatives for minority children are unnecessary. A second reason was the contentiousness of race in most of these communities. When Durham and Chattanooga merged predominantly white county schools and predominantly African American city schools, divisions along racial lines appeared over merger issues. Kansas City and Cleveland were ordered by the court to desegregate their systems. The findings of discrimination in their schools that led to these court orders were divisive, and district leaders may have been reluctant to raise the issue of race. They may have also been reluctant to create programs for specific ethnic groups for fear of appearing to "single out" or favor one group over another.

Some RSOs' theories of change may not deal explicitly with race. Or they may choose other issues as a proxy for race, such as class, which is in itself a major issue in urban schools. Yet race and class both

ATTEMPTING TO REMEDY INEQUITIES IN TWO DISTRICTS

- The small learning communities that are the core of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education's reform approach and that have been implemented in **Kansas City** have offered safe places where issues of race and class could be addressed. The community roundtables have also provided forums to discuss these issues.
- **Hamilton County** attempted to respond to the needs of minority children in ways less overtly defined by race. It targeted the lowest-performing elementary schools in the district, whose students are also overwhelming poor and African American, and created the position of Assistant Superintendent for Urban Education to oversee those programs.

have their own powerful dynamics, and while they may compound one another, they are by no means identical. The struggles in each of the five districts – and the powerful vestiges of discrimination that persist – were about race, not class.

Many urban districts now serve an overwhelmingly minority student population. For reform to work in these places, it must sooner or later come to grips with race. At some point in the reform process, RSOs will need to develop the capacity and the will to deal with this issue and to engage the sensibilities of the district and community about it.

Degree of Independence of the RSO from the District

When an outside organization has been given information by the district that may highlight its challenges and pinpoint its shortcomings, does the organization make a private suggestion or a public demand for district change?

As RSOs work with districts to build capacity, they must induce the district to be honest about problems. If the RSO gives the community negative information about the district that goes beyond widely available information such as test scores, the district may see that as a breach of trust.

If imported RSOs have criticisms of the district, these are normally pointed out privately or presented as questions in the give-and-take that is part of structured interactions with district personnel. In many of the districts in the study, it is not the imported RSO's role to hold districts accountable or to demand reform in ways that go beyond their formal agreements to establish processes and deliver products that will move a district along a mutually understood path to reform. Indeed, the community may find it difficult to trust an organization that is monitoring district performance if the same organization is collaborating with the district on several projects.

Local RSOs are often in a more ambivalent position. Many of them started as a volunteer group of citizens eager to improve their community's schools, and communities often equate the need for improvement with underperformance by the district. As a local RSO attempts to address shortcomings in the district, it may be reluctant to be cast as a public critic of the system, since it depends on a good relationship with the district to carry out its work.

There is a gradation among RSOs in their degree of independence from the district, especially among local RSOs. The RSOs in the study tended to work closely with the district. Some RSOs, not examined in this study, consider themselves, at least in part, to be "advocacy" organizations; that is, organizations that maintain some independence from the district and that "demand" reform rather than limiting themselves to "pushing for" reform and can therefore play the role of holding the district accountable to the community. The potential contributions of advocacy organizations to systemic reform in districts invite further investigation, attention, and support.

The Need for Multiple RSOs

Systemic reform is hard work that requires, at a minimum, not only money but also an extraordinary investment of time, energy, and goodwill by many people. So great and varied are districts' needs that they typically surpass the abilities of one RSO, imported or local, to meet them all. RSOs share the same goal – improving student outcomes – but their expertise lies in different areas. Some specialize in structural areas such as management, finance, or the infrastructure of reform; others in building

teacher knowledge and skills to improve teaching and learning. For reform to be systemic, it is critical that work in one area be connected to improvements in the others. A district should ensure that it involves organizations that have expertise in both structural reform and in teaching and learning.

As noted above, foundations play a critical role in RSO/district partnerships that often goes well beyond the traditional foundation role of financial support. Their presence in the mix of support organizations is fundamental to the success of a partnership.

The superintendent in each study district, while valuing the contributions of multiple organizations, and in many instances seeking them out, also acknowledged that partnering with more than one RSO carries the risk of potentially pulling the district in different directions. Each superintendent has tried to ensure that the work of each RSO or advocacy organization is complementary to the others and that all of it aligns with the district's goals and reform plan.

USING MULTIPLE RSOS

- **Flint** Community Schools had two partners in reform – the Busara Group, which focused mostly on management and financial issues, and the Panasonic Foundation, which addressed primarily teaching and learning – as well as critical assistance from Michigan State University.
- In **Durham**, the Center for Leadership in School Reform has focused on strengthening teaching and learning. While CLSR's reform approach, Working on the Work, has been the core of Durham's reform work, the district has also sought out financial support and technical assistance from other organizations such as the National Science Foundation, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and Duke University.
- In **Cleveland**, each of several RSOs developed specific areas of expertise around unmet needs they saw at the district and school levels. These efforts complemented each other but for the most part were not collaborative. The George Gund and Cleveland foundations, with Cleveland Tomorrow, a business-backed group, provided extensive financial support and sustained leadership at critical times. Cleveland has also experimented with various national RSOs.

  When Cleveland's new superintendent came on board, she developed a comprehensive reform plan and pushed successfully for the consolidation of several RSOs into one major RSO. The goal of consolidation was to increase efficiency, monitor activities more easily, focus the work more effectively on the superintendent's reform vision, and take back traditional functions the district had previously been incapable of fulfilling. The consolidation has also raised issues of independence and accountability to the community, capacity of the district, and sustainability of the reform through changes in district leadership.

Practical Questions to Ask about External Reform Support Partnerships

Partnerships between RSOs and school districts are about change. Usually these relationships are established when the district leader realizes that it is in the district's interest to do something new or in a different way, that the success of the enterprise depends on building the district's capacity, and that an external organization can help to build this capacity. Less often, a funding partner or a reform support organization takes the initiative to suggest a relationship.

The series of questions that follows grew out of the analysis of RSO/district relationships, in which Kronley & Associates found certain common factors that directly affect the RSO/ district relationship: the nature of the RSO (local vs. imported), the RSO's beliefs and approaches, expectations for the partnership, funding, depth and reach of interventions, control exercised by the district over the RSO's intervention, duration of the partnership, and assessment of the joint work.

District leaders themselves are the best judges of what will promote reform in their districts. These questions are offered as a template that can and should be modified to address the unique circumstances of individual RSO/district relationships. District leaders may wish to ask some or all of these questions as they consider or enter into engagements with RSOs, as the relationship takes hold and matures, and as they seek to sustain the reform that is a product of the relationship. Many of the questions can also be adapted by reform support organizations for their own use.

Before Engagement

- Do we have a comprehensive vision of reform?
  - What is it?
  - Who knows what it is (in the central office, in the schools, in the community)?
- Have we articulated our goals?
  - How?
  - To whom?
  - What data demonstrate the need for these goals?
  - Who is familiar with the data?
- What kind of help do we need in reaching our goals?
  - From whom?
  - To do what?
  - For how long?
- What do we know about the RSO? Does it have the capacity to work with us and to meet our needs?
  - Do we know the RSO's approach to/philosophy of reform and its areas of expertise?
  - Do we know how closely the RSO adheres to its approach or philosophy?
  - Have we seen evidence of its effectiveness?
- How well does the RSO's approach or philosophy match the district's goals and vision?
  - Have we worked together before? Have we been satisfied with the work and the relationship?
  - Are we entering this relationship for reasons other than promoting reform (e.g., connections with the organization, the RSO's or district's fund-raising needs, pressure from an important constituency)?
  - Who from the district and RSO will be most involved? Can they work together effectively?

- Could we describe to a teacher, parent, or community leader why we *think* a *relationship* with the RSO is right for us?

• Is there a third-party funder involved in establishing the partnership?
- If not, how is this effort to be paid for? Is there a fund-raising plan? Who is responsible for its implementation?
- If so, what is the role of the third-party funder? Is it active or passive? For how long is the commitment? What is the funder's demand on district resources?

• Who else do we need to involve in creating support for the reform?
- Who should be informed about or have input into our decision to engage the RSO (the board, unions, parents, the community, students)?
- At what stage should they be involved? Do we want to seek input in order to make a good decision, or market what we believe to be the right decision?
- Where will resistance to the relationship or the reform plans come from? How can it be diffused? What are the respective roles of the district and the RSO in dealing with resistance?
- Are there other organizations, such as business groups, unions, child advocacy groups, and service delivery organizations, that can add value to the partnership? If so, how can these capacities be used?
- What should the district do to "market" the reform to outside stakeholders?

• What do we expect from our engagement with the RSO?
- Can we develop a written statement of expectations?
- Are these expectations aligned with what the RSO is to deliver?
- Are these aligned with the expectations of *third-party funders*?
- Do we need to consider the expectations of any other stakeholders? Who are they?

• What outcomes are we looking for? How will we monitor progress?
- What is the time frame for these outcomes? Which are interim and which are long-term?
- Is the timeline reasonable given the district's current capacity?
- How will these outcomes be measured?
- What data will we need to measure outcomes? How will these be collected? By whom?
- With whom will this information be shared? Is there a plan to disseminate information about the reform and its outcomes to internal and external stakeholders?
- What will happen if the hoped-for outcomes do not occur? Is there a way to make adjustments in what we are doing and how we are doing it?

• What structural and policy changes are needed?
- What staff, if any, need modified job descriptions or reassignments to work on this joint effort?
- Does the relationship rely on any changes to policy or practice that need to be approved by the school board? That require contractual modifications?

Implementation, Progress, and Outcomes

• What are we learning about our progress?
- As we reflect on the assumptions that guided our engagement, which seem to be correct? Which were incorrect and why?
- Are the necessary relationships being established and are the planned activities happening?
- How has the context in which we are working changed (e.g., new board members, change in

budgets and state policies, results on standardized tests, changes in district or RSO staffing)?
  - Based on our continuing assessment, what needs to change in the RSO/ district relationship or the work itself? Do we need new indicators of progress?

- Is there qualitative evidence that the reform is taking hold?
  - Is a common language emerging about the reform?
  - What are we hearing and seeing about changes in practice and/or structure?
  - Are other stakeholders aware of the effort and referring positively to it?
  - Is the reform spreading beyond the "first wave" (schools, clusters) of implementation?
  - Is leadership for the reform emerging from central office, building, and instructional staff?
  - Are educators talking about or taking on "new roles"?

Sustaining the Reform

- Are we planning for the future?
  - What elements of the reform do we wish to maintain?
  - What outside support will we need to maintain them?
  - Is there local capacity to provide this support?
  - How will we fund these elements?
  - What other elements do we need to address?
  - Do we need additional support from another organization?

- Should the reform relationship between the district and the RSO continue? How could it be improved?
  - Is there stakeholder support for continuing the reform?
  - Is there sufficient capacity in the district to internalize the effort?
  - Are there local organizations that can add value to this work?
  - Have we provided sufficient support for the next stage of the endeavor?

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School Communities that Work

is supported by generous funding from

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The Ford Foundation

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I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: A District Leader's Guide to Relationships that Support Systemic Change

Author(s): School Communities that Work:A District Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

Corporate Source: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

Publication Date: March 2003

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